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Longitudinal patterns of internally generated complaints filed against a large cohort of police officers

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This study explores the relationship between police officer experience and problem behaviours using internally generated complaints and longitudinal data gathered from a large cohort of officers. Since extant research on problem behaviours has been cross-sectional and employs citizen complaints, little is known about the patterns of internal problem behaviours over time. As there is no guidance in police research for examining these behaviours across experience, the criminal career paradigm is employed. Results suggest that aggregate patterns over time parallel those of citizen complaints from this same cohort. Implications are discussed.

Keywords: police misconduct; experience; internal complaints

Police departments have been increasingly interested with the identification and control of problematic officers, as is evidenced by the embracing of new technologies such as Early Intervention (EI) systems, and new accountability standards such as open and accessible citizen complaint systems (Walker 2005). As such, it becomes vital that scholarly research examines potential indicators of problem behaviours in an effort to more accurately locate potential problem officers.

This study focuses on the longitudinal patterns of internally generated complaints across a large cohort of officers. Specifically, it addresses the aggregate pattern of these problem behaviours and their relationship to officer experience. In doing so, it frames such patterns from a career perspective in order to assess which officers engage in these problem behaviours, and for officers who engage in them, when they typically begin and end and how frequently they occur. Such information is important in that few studies have addressed internally generated complaints as a potential indicator of problem behaviour, despite several advantages of these types of complaints over citizen complaints, and none has specifically addressed longitudinal patterns of these behaviours.

Officer experience and problem behaviours

There is a long-standing speculation in the policing literature that experience as an officer and problem behaviours are related over time. While there is little empirical

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evidence exploring this relationship, police work is often described by scholars as a craft where officers learn in the field across years of experience, not in their training academies or in subsequent training seminars (Wilson 1968, Bayley and Bittner 1984). If accurate, then there will likely be a learning curve associated with police work which extends beyond the typical probationary period, and how long it takes officers to gain proficiency in their craft, and what stumbling blocks they encounter along the way, remains an interesting question.

It is likely that inexperienced officers are more likely to engage in problematic police behaviours, since such officers have little mastery of their craft and have yet to find a style of policing that works for them. Some of the first observations of police work noted that younger officers are often 'gung ho', seeking to prove themselves to the more veteran officers by displaying command over citizens in encounters and demonstrating no hesitation in applying coercive authority (Van Maanen 1974, Hunt 1985). Others have noted that younger, less experienced officers are 'hungry' and will do more to detect crime and criminals (Friedrich 1977, Worden 1989, Crank 1993).

While youth and inexperience have long been seen as contributors to problematic police behaviours, it is suspected that eventually inexperienced officers begin to adopt the 'lay low and don't make waves' approach of their more veteran colleagues, while also improving in the core aspects of police work (Van Maanen 1974, Bayley and Bittner 1984). Part of this may be that officers are gradually socialised away from engaging in acts that may bring scrutiny and/or disciplinary acts against them, and become more concerned with safeguarding their career records to assist in future advancement. Thus, to the extent that most officers' careers are similar, one might expect to find officers displaying the greatest amount of problem behaviours early in their careers, but that these behaviours decline in frequency over time as officers begin to master their craft and develop a larger stake in their career.

Current research paints an incomplete picture of the relationship between experience and problem behaviours, largely due to a narrow focus on the most problematic officers and a reliance on citizen complaints as the sole measure of problem behaviours. Generally, research investigating problem behaviours amongst police officers has noted in several departments that a small number of officers account for a disproportionate amount of citizen complaints filed (Walker and Bumphus 1992). Such a group has been labelled *problem officers*, a group first noted by Goldstein (1977), but whose existence gained prominence amongst police administrators following the Christopher Commission's investigation of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) after the beating of Rodney King. The Commission noted that less than one-half of 1% of the LAPD officers accounted for 15% of citizen complaints of excessive force or improper tactics, and noted that this disproportion could not be explained by assignment or arrest rates, implying these problem officers had a proclivity towards deviance (Independent Commission on the Los Angeles Police Department 1991).

Subsequent studies using cross-sectional data and varying operationalisations of problem officers find that such officers are typically male, young and inexperienced (Lersch and Mieczkowski 1996, Brandl *et al.* 2001). While an important confirmation of this long suspected relationship between experience and problem behaviours, such cross-sectional research has important limitations. First, the research relies on citizen complaints for a short time as the indicator of problem behaviours, which are imperfect for several reasons. A complaint filed by a citizen represents frustration

rising from an officer's behaviour, but could easily be invalid if the citizen is uninformed of rules or departmental procedure. The complaint could also be false, filed by a citizen who was upset at being the subject of a police action, such as a search or arrest. Citizen complaints which are investigated and found to be valid have merit, but due to the strong evidentiary requirements, the number of sustained complaints is often low. Citizen complaints can also be viewed as by-products of officer activity, and as such the most proactive and productive officers may obtain citizen complaints for reasons other than a proclivity for deviance (Lersch 2002).

Another alternative measure of problem behaviour is internally generated complaints. Internal complaints are filed against an officer by other officers, typically (but not exclusively) supervisors. While citizen complaints usually include behaviours such as rudeness, excessive use of force and employing improper tactics (Lersch and Mieczkowski 2000), internally generated complaints cover other different – but possibly related – types of problem behaviour such as neglect of duty, insubordination or submitting a false report.

While there is a fair amount of research around complaints filed by citizens, there are few investigations into internally generated complaints. Yet internal complaints avoid several of the drawbacks of citizen complaints noted above. First, since officers know what is and is not allowed by policy, there is no over-reporting of problem behaviours. Second, it is unlikely that internal complaints are a by-product of productivity as may be true of citizen complaints. While under-reporting is still a concern, as officers (even supervisors) are likely reticent to bring complaints against other officers because it places career advancement at risk (Klockars *et al.* 2005), it is surprising that scholars have not examined internal complaints and their relationship to citizen complaints more closely. The sparse research on internal complaints notes that they occur with much less frequency than citizen complaints, but do appear to be sustained at much higher rates (Griswold 1994, Liderbach *et al.* 2007). Internal complaints also bear a moderate relationship with citizen complaints, so that officers who accumulate citizen complaints also tend to receive internal complaints as well (Lersch and Mieczkowski 2000).

In addition to relying on citizen complaints, a second limitation of current research is its focus on arbitrarily defined problem officers over a short time period. There is little discussion on just what threshold should establish an officer as a 'problem' (is it five complaints in 2 years? Six in 5 years?), and part of this limited consideration is a lack of knowledge about the patterns of problem behaviours more generally. It comes as little surprise, based on the above discussion, that officers who are young and inexperienced are selected as problem officers, as it is likely that problem behaviours are at their peak during this early period. Yet other important elements of the patterns of problem behaviours could also be investigated and would provide police administrators with a more comprehensive picture of how problem behaviours develop and change over time.

A means for exploring officers' careers

Harris (2009) has suggested employing the five elements from the criminal career paradigm as a means of exploring career patterns of problem behaviour over time. Criminologists, much like police scholars, had focused attention on *career criminals* – a small group of offenders who commit a disproportionate amount of crime. But unlike

police scholars, criminologists have broadened consideration from their high-rate offenders to the careers of all types of criminals more generally. In doing so, they devised a way to organise and examine key elements of antisocial behaviours over time.

The criminal career itself is comprised of five elements: (1) *onset*, the beginning of one's criminal career; (2) *frequency*, the number of offenses that occur while an offender is active; (3) *duration*, the length of a criminal's career; and (4) *desistence*, the decline in offending that eventually leads to career termination. This model also implies that individuals come from two groups, criminals and non-criminals, which provide the final element of the criminal career: (5) *participation*, which is the percentage of the population that is actively engaged in crime during some period, or who has ever engaged in crime.

To the extent that one can consider involvement in police problem behaviours under the concept of a career, the criminal career paradigm can aid in exploring patterns of these problem behaviours. It should be noted that this paradigm is not a theory of antisocial behaviour, but is a means of organising and examining such behaviour over time. Thus, applying such a career perspective to problem behaviours does not provide one with explanations of observed patterns, only a way to more closely examine them.

Nevertheless, such an approach could contribute to police research in several ways. First, it broadens consideration from a narrow focus on problem officers to problem behaviours more generally. This perspective gets away from deciding how many complaints an officer requires in x amount of years to be deemed a 'problem', and begins to encourage consideration of how officers differ in their overall problem-behaviour patterns across their career course. In addition, current cross-sectional research has only been able to examine participation and to a limited extent frequency, but has yet to consider onset and desistence. In the problem officer research, one does not know if internal complaints filed against officers are their first or last, and so exactly when officers began their involvement in such problem behaviours, and how long they continue remains unknown.

Second, knowledge of the patterns of problematic behaviours can help to pinpoint more accurately the warning signs that indicate deviation from normal development. Specifically, one can discover what level of problem behaviour is typical of officers, and how and when other officers deviate from the typical pattern. If problem officers are truly the most problematic, they should exhibit an earlier onset, longer duration and a greater number of problem behaviours than less problematic officers.

Third, such analyses would also provide knowledge about when to specifically target interventions. For example, if there is a place in officers' careers where problem behaviours peak, this suggests a critical period in which influential processes operate that facilitate that increase, directing researchers to more closely examine proximal causal mechanisms that prompted the behaviour. It may also be that the various career elements have different etiologies, and so, for example, the reasons why onset of problem behaviours occurs may be different from the reasons why they are maintained.

Harris (2009) employing the same longitudinal data as is used here, found that citizen complaints and experience were related in an orderly way in the aggregate, with complaint rates quickly rising and peaking during the third year of experience with a slow decline thereafter. The career features of what he termed the *experience-problem*

behaviour curve were also explored: the percentage of officers ever participating in problem behaviours was 80%, but most officers accumulated only one or two citizen complaints over their career; and average time of onset was during the latter part of the third year of experience, but those officers who received three or more citizen complaints had an earlier onset of about 1 year. Frequency tended to be low, averaging about one-half of one complaint per year, and average desistance occurred in the middle of the ninth year of experience.

An interesting question arises when pondering internally generated complaints: do they exhibit a similar pattern? While they certainly represent a different set of problem behaviours, research suggests that internally related problem behaviours could follow a pattern similar to externally related problem behaviours, only at lower rates (Lersch and Mieczkowski 2000). There is likely a learning curve to meeting the internal expectations of a department in much the same way there is a learning curve to meeting the expectations of citizens in developing the police craft. The difference is that supervisors and other officers are more likely to give their colleagues leeway with making mistakes, and are thus less likely to file complaints internally, when compared with citizens who likely have less tolerance for problem behaviours and will more likely report them.

An alternative hypothesis would be that less experienced officers are more prone to do things 'by the book', as they were taught in the academy, and may be also more fearful of making mistakes. Both of these could combine to make newer officers more rule compliant than more experienced officers, and therefore less likely to receive internal complaints early in their careers.

Research questions

The purpose of the research presented here is to address two general questions:

- (1) Does a relationship exist between experience and problem behaviours – as measured by internal complaints – in the aggregate, and if so, does it appear similar to the pattern of citizen complaints presented elsewhere (see Harris 2009)?
- (2) What are the underlying career features of this aggregate relationship (i.e. onset, frequency, duration, desistance and participation)?

Data and methods

Data

The data utilised for this research were collected as part of an EI System project for a large police department in the northeastern USA.¹ Generally, these data contain several indicators of police behaviour for all sworn officers who were employed by this agency from 1 January 1987 through 30 June 2001.

The late 1980s cohort

To maximise the advantages of the sample timeframe, officers who entered the police agency during the study period based on years of experience were selected and placed

into a cohort. This cohort, who is termed the late 1980s cohort, consists of officers who entered the agency between 1 January 1987 and 31 December 1990. These officers, by the end of the sample period, have the potential to serve 11.5–14.5 years, which is a significant portion of their career term given that officers can retire with a full pension after 20 years of service.²

The formation of this cohort was based largely on a need to examine officers from the start of their careers for as long a time as possible, with a sufficient number of cases for analysis. Since all officers in the time period for which data were gathered were serving different portions of their career, one would be concerned that officers entering in varying time periods would be significantly different from each other. As such, only officers who began their careers during the timeframe were selected, so they could be followed from the start of their careers until data collection ceased. This obviously leaves only the officers who entered between 1987 and 2001. The agency under study hired no officers in 1995, leaving an even number of preceding years ($n = 8$) upon which to divide in half based on the new decade of 1990. Since there were no detectable cohort effects (i.e. no significant changes in training, hiring or administrative practices) upon which to separate officers who entered between 1987 and 1990, and there were a sufficiently large number of officers who entered during these years, it seemed reasonable to use this group.

Dependent variable

The dependent variable representing internal problem behaviour in this study are complaints filed internally by officers. The database that includes this information is maintained by the agency's Internal Affairs Bureau (IAB), and contains fields for the date of the incident, the nature of the allegations and the complaint's disposition.

The internal complaint process operates similarly to the citizen complaint process. Internal complaints are filed by officers, are received in the same manner as citizen complaints (in person, by mail, by phone, by fax and via email), and can be received by any officer. All such complaints are sent to IAB where they logged into a database. While there is no data on who filed the complaint, discussions with IAB officers reveal that most internal complaints are filed by supervisors concerning subordinates, and rarely do officers of the same rank file complaints against one another.

In analyses of internal complaints, all such complaints ($N = 1023$) are analysed, regardless of subtype or disposition. This was done for two reasons. First, the agency at the time of this study was working on developing specific complaint types and developing procedures to categorise them. During the study period, the complaint types were created and categorised by a single person responsible for maintaining these data, and as such there are no formal means by which these complaint types were constructed or categorised. Thus, it is suspected that many of these complaint types lack validity. The agency does aggregate complaints into nine broad categories referred to as *case-character codes*. These are presented in Table 1. As one might expect, the vast majority of the internal complaints filed fall under the code of 'internal administrative matters'. Within this code there are 40 specific internal complaint categories. Over half (54.9%) of these complaints are accounted for by

Table 1. Case character codes for internal complaints.

Code	Percentage (%)
Internal administrative matters	83.4
Racial discrimination	0.1
Criminal conduct on duty	1.0
Criminal conduct off duty	1.7
Sexual harassment	0.4
Use of force	2.2
Use of firearms	5.2
Service complaints	4.2
Traffic violations	1.8
<i>N</i> = 1035	

only four categories. They are: (1) neglect of duty (18%); (2) disobedience (15.8%); (3) internal administrative matters (11.3%); and (4) lost or damaged equipment (9.8%). As one can see, these are rather broad and are not well defined. None of the remaining categories accounted for more than 3% of the internal complaints filed, and most account for 1% or less.

Second, most of the internal complaints were substantiated. Only 5% of internal complaints were unsubstantiated, and so there is little reason to separate these cases based on their adjudicated outcome.

Related to complaint categories, there is also the issue of a single incident giving rise to both citizen and internal complaints for the same problem behaviour. One would not want to double-count a complaint if both a citizen and a supervisor filed a complaint against an officer for the same behaviour, as this would artificially inflate the level of problem behaviour. While this is a hypothetical possibility, analyses reveal that nowhere was an internal and citizen complaint filed under the same complaint category for the same incident, indicating that citizen and internal complaint types are mutually exclusive.

Also, there is the question of assignment. Most of the internal complaints were filed against patrol officers, since investigative and supervisory positions carry with them less risk for internal complaints in general. Still, the estimations presented below, and the substantive conclusions drawn from them, are very similar whether one restricts consideration to periods when officers served in patrol, or all officers in the cohort regardless of their assignment.³ As such, the analyses consider all officers regardless of assignment, and are not limited to the time when officers only served as patrol officers.

Independent variable

The independent variable in this research is the year of experience for the officer. Years of experience were calculated based on an officer's date of entry, and each citizen complaint was placed into a year of experience based on the date in which it was filed.⁴ Thus, for each officer, the officer-complaint file tallies the total number of

citizen complaints for each year of experience until the observation period ended or the officer left the agency.⁵

Analytic strategy

The analyses presented herein mirror those used by early criminal career researchers. First, the average rates of internal complaints for the cohort across each year of experience are calculated and presented below. Second, rates of *cumulative participation*, which is the percentage of officers who have *ever* received an internal complaint in their career, are explored. Third, the average year of onset for the cohort is estimated, and the relationship between onset and average complaint rates is explored. Fourth, there are also the questions of how often officers engage in problem behaviours once they initiate, and for how long. To estimate frequency, the incidence of problem behaviours is estimated by removing the first complaint as a measure of onset – thus demonstrating an officer is ‘active’ in problem behaviours – and the last complaint – marking a ‘desistance’ point – to estimate the number of years an officer was active. A complaint frequency rate is then calculated for these active officers by examining their remaining complaints across years active during the study period. Thus, only active officers have meaningful estimations of frequency, desistance and duration.

Results

The aggregate curve

The first step is to explore at the aggregate level the relationship of internal problem behaviours across experience. The aggregate curve for the cohort is presented in Figure 1. When examining this figure, it is not apparent that experience and internal problem behaviours are related in an orderly way. The curve quickly peaks in Year 2 and experiences a decline over time, but the decline is not steady. This is likely due to the extremely low rates of these complaints and thus a limited variation in this indicator.

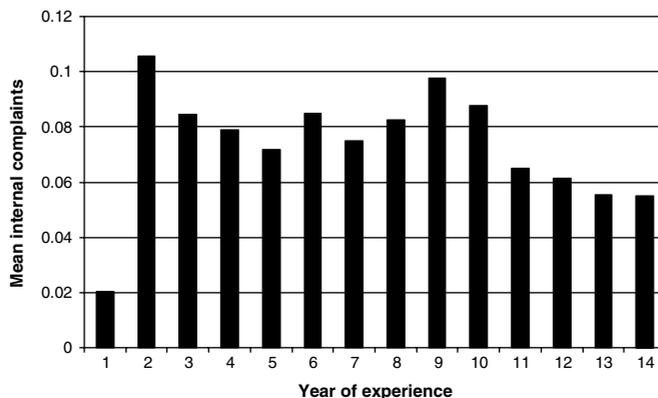


Figure 1. Average internal complaints by year of experience.

Participation

The cumulative participation of the cohort is 47.9%. So, roughly half of the cohort received at least one internal complaint sometime in their career. While cumulative participation appears to be quite high, one might suspect an even greater percentage of officers would have a complaint lodged against them had complete career data been available.

Figure 2 displays the cumulative participation of officers across years of experience. Thus, this figure displays the proportion of the cohort that ever received a complaint by each year of experience. As one can see, the prevalence increases sharply across the first 4 years of experience and begins to increase less sharply thereafter. Specifically, this cohort's cumulative participation for the first 2 years of experience is 10.9%; it nearly doubles to 21.4% by Year 4, but then takes another 6 years to double again, reaching 42.8% in Year 10 and then increasing slightly more to 47.9% by Year 14. Thus, while more years of data would likely increase participation, it is likely that year-to-year increases past the 14th year would be rather small.

Onset

Table 2 presents the average onset of internal problem behaviours for all and for active officers. Since this distribution is skewed, median estimations are also presented. For the cohort, the average onset for internal complaints is the middle of the fifth year of experience. Variation around this mean is rather large, which is why the mean onset point is not equal to the point at which the rates peak in Figure 2.

Also of interest is the onset for the subset of active officers. The onset point for active officers, that is, those officers with three or more internal complaints in their career, is earlier when compared to all officers with at least one internal complaint. This may imply that officers with a greater number of internal complaints exhibit their problem behaviours earlier in their careers. Thus, an early onset may be an important risk factor in determining which officers are more likely to be problematic throughout their career. This idea is further explored below when examining the frequency of internal problem behaviours.

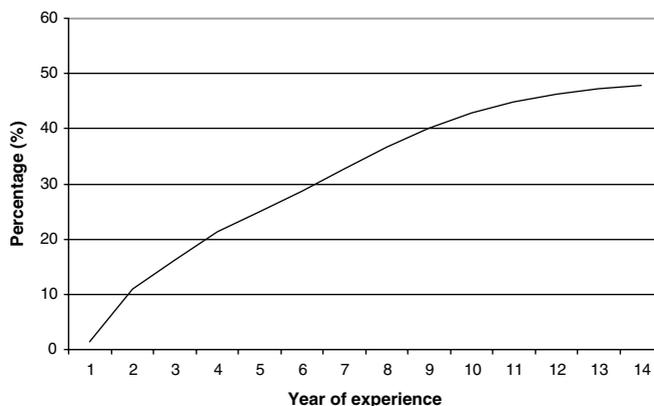


Figure 2. Prevalence of internal complaints by year of experience.

Table 2. Onset for entire cohort and active officers only.

	Mean	Median	SD
All officers, $N = 1138$	5.7	5.0	3.4
Active only, $n = 133$	4.1	3.0	2.6

Frequency

There is also the question of how often officers engage in problem behaviours once they initiate, and for how long. Table 3 presents the frequency distribution of the total internal complaints filed against the officers in this cohort. There were a total of 1023 internal complaints filed against the 1138 officers in the cohort, but complaints were not evenly distributed across this population. When examining internal complaints, 52.1% of all the officers have zero complaints, 37.6% have one or two and 10.3% have three or more. This means that for the vast majority of officers, the requirement of three internal complaints to calculate frequency is not applicable, and thus is an inappropriate statistic. This also demonstrates that for those officers who do receive internal complaints, their complaint total will be low, even across the course of many years. In fact, while some officers do receive as many as six complaints in their career, the vast majority of officers who do have complaints obtain one or two. The requirement of at least three personnel complaints to calculate frequency limits the number of officers available for analysis by nearly 90%.

Table 4 further explores the relationship between year of onset and the average number of internal complaints received by officers for each onset year. As can be seen, officers demonstrating an earlier year of onset are indeed more likely to receive a larger number of internal complaints on average than officers exhibiting a later onset date. Part of this variation between year of onset and accumulation of complaints is due to length of observation, as those who begin their problem behaviours earlier have more time to accumulate complaints. Still, the table demonstrates a clear tendency of early starters to engage in more problematic behaviours. This is interesting in that it parallels the criminal career research which

Table 3. Frequency distribution of internal complaints.

Number of complaints	Number of officers	Percentage of officers (%)
0	593	52.1
1	292	25.7
2	135	11.9
3	58	5.1
4	34	3.0
5	13	1.1
6–9	13	1.1
$N = 1023$	$N = 1138$	
Mean = 0.90		
Median = 0		
SD = 1.3		

Table 4. Internal complaints by year of onset.

Year of onset	Mean number of complaints	Number of officers
1	2.4	16
2	2.4	108
3	2.4	60
4	2.0	59
5	1.6	41
6	2.0	44
7	1.7	43
8	1.5	46
9	1.4	39
10	1.4	31
11	1.4	23
12	1.2	16
13	1.3	11
14	1.0	8

demonstrates that individuals with an early age of onset tend to commit crimes at greater rates than those with a later age of onset (Piquero *et al.* 2007).

Given these frequency estimations, and the estimations of participation, one can see that while many officers engage in internal problem behaviours, those who do participate do so at very low rates. In fact, most officers receive only one or two internal complaints during the study period, if they receive any. However, the few officers who do receive multiple internal complaints still do not typically exceed more than one complaint per year on average. In fact, only 5.2% of officers had an average frequency rate of one or more citizen complaints a year when active. Still, consistent with previous research, a small percentage of officers do account for a disproportionate amount of internal complaints during the study period – the top 10% of officers with complaints account for about 45% of all such complaints.

Table 5 presents the career characteristics of active officers, and thus includes measures of duration and desistance. As can be seen from the table, active officers in this cohort received their last internal complaint near the middle of their ninth year of experience, and subtracting the average year of onset gives officers an average duration of just under five and one-half years. Given that active officers have an average frequency of 0.48 complaints per year while active, they will attain on average about 2.5 complaints total in the time they are active. There is a significant amount of variation around these career features, indicating that active officers may

Table 5. Average career elements for active officers.

Measures	Mean	Median	SD
Onset	4.1	3.0	2.6
Frequency	0.48	0.33	0.45
Duration	5.3	6.0	3.1
Desistance	9.4	9.0	3.2
<i>N</i> = 133			

substantively differ in their involvement in problem behaviours over time. This also suggests that a problem/non-problem officer dichotomy may not adequately capture this important variation in describing the careers of officers in terms of internal problem behaviours.

Discussion

The findings reported herein demonstrate that internal complaints do not follow as clear a pattern over time as do citizen complaints with this cohort. Internal complaints occur much less frequently than citizen complaints, even though prevalence in this cohort was moderate, with nearly half of all officers receiving at least one internal complaint. While prevalence was moderate, frequency was extremely low, with most officers receiving only one or two internal complaints, even over a lengthy observation period.

Even though frequency was rather low, even for officers deemed active in internal problem behaviours, there was a systematic, negative relationship between onset and frequency. Specifically, while average onset was in the latter half of the fifth year of experience, officers who had an early onset did accumulate a larger number of internal complaints on average across the study period. While partially due to observation length, there is a clear pattern of those with an earlier onset to engage in a greater number of internal problem behaviours. This would be expected if internal complaints do indeed measure some propensity for involvement in problem behaviours, since one might reasonably expect more problematic officers to engage in these behaviours early and often when compared to less problematic officers.

Finally, for active officers, the desistance point came during the middle of the ninth year of experience, with career lengths lasting on average just over 5 years. Given the average frequency, the typical active officer career begins in Year 4, continues for 5 years and ends in the middle of the ninth year of experience. During this time the average active officer will accumulate an average of 2.5 internal complaints. While this average demonstrates a relatively short involvement in problem behaviours with a low degree of frequency, there is quite a bit of variation around these average career features. This implies that there is a continuum of internal problem behaviours, extending from officers with a relatively limited involvement in problem behaviours to officers who are involved in problem behaviours early, often and for a greater portion of their career.

These career features of internal complaints are interesting in that even though they occur at much lower rates, the substantive conclusions drawn from them mirror those of citizen complaints (see Harris 2009). That is, prevalence is fairly large, but most officers only receive one or two complaints of both types. The onset of internal complaints is much later when compared to citizen complaints. This may imply that supervisors know which officers are more problematic than others, but may hesitate to file complaints against them until the problem officer reaches some tipping point where supervisors begin to document an officer's problem behaviours. Because of this hesitation, internal complaints begin later than the onset point of citizen complaints. Still, for both complaint types, onset appears to be a risk factor for more prolonged and frequent involvement in problem behaviours. The desistance points for active officers for both complaints types were similar as well, during the middle of the ninth year of experience, and frequency rates for both were about 0.50.

Of course, these data are not without limitations. First, internally generated complaints suffer from under-reporting. Based on previous work, it is likely that supervisors often lack motivation to file complaints against other officers, since it places future career advancement in jeopardy. Thus, the low rates of internal problem behaviours exhibited here are likely a reserved estimate of career features, particularly prevalence. Second, data were not available for the entire careers of officers, making estimations of career length, desistance and frequency of active officers biased, presuming that such officers with additional career data would have additional complaints to consider, thereby increasing duration and delaying desistance estimates. The strength of these estimations, however, is that they do consider the years when officers are most at risk for complaints. Complete career data are unlikely to substantively alter the career estimations of problem behaviours presented herein, but one must nevertheless note that false desistance remains an issue. One might suspect that officers near retirement, or those who have a guaranteed pension, may increase their level of problem behaviours as they move into the twilight of their careers and have less of a stake in their future.

Conclusion

The important takeaway from this study is that persistent problem behaviour, as measured by internal complaints, is infrequent. While about half of all officers will receive an internal complaint sometime in their career, few will obtain multiple complaints. The extent to which this pattern is due to the careful screening of applicants, routine supervision already established within the agency and the sanctions (both formal and informal) officers experience following an internal complaint, measurement error or a combination thereof remains unknown. As in criminal career research, police scholarship should become concerned not only with 'what works' in terms of combating problem behaviours both internally and externally, but also with how career events and interventions may differentially effect the onset, persistence and desistance of these various behaviours.

Future research should attempt to replicate these results by examining the career elements of problem behaviours in other agencies. If an agency's problem-behaviour elements of onset, frequency, desistance, duration and participation are known in the aggregate, it provides a baseline for detecting officers who might deviate from this normal pattern, indicating a need for intervention.

Research on problem officers could also be enhanced by employing career elements in defining and operationalising this officer type, and also by broadening consideration to multiple types of officers who exhibit problem behaviours. If problem officers are truly the most problematic, their problem behaviours should have an earlier onset, a greater frequency of these behaviours while active and a longer duration (and hence a later desistance point), than less problematic officers.

There is also a need to more carefully explore the relationship of internal complaints to citizen complaints, and these indicators to other potential indicators of problem behaviour such as uses of force, police-vehicle accidents, involvement in civil litigation, etc. As it stands, there is little research which investigates these relationships, and as such administrators must rely on intuition in determining what indicators to employ in their EI systems.

Notes

1. As part of the agreement between the research team and the police agency under study, the agency can only be referred to in these terms and no additional identifying characteristics can be provided.
2. Officers averaged 12 years of experience with a standard deviation of 2.4 years.
3. This is likely because the majority of officers were not promoted until their 10th year of experience or after. Very few officers were promoted before or during their sixth year.
4. Some complaints were missing a filing date, so it was estimated based on the ordinary time lag between receipt of a complaint and the date that reports are either due or are received.
5. Information was available on the date when all officers left this agency, and as such the data can distinguish between observation periods where an officer received zero citizen complaints and observation periods after an officer left the agency. The data exclude officers who did not serve past their probationary period.

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